



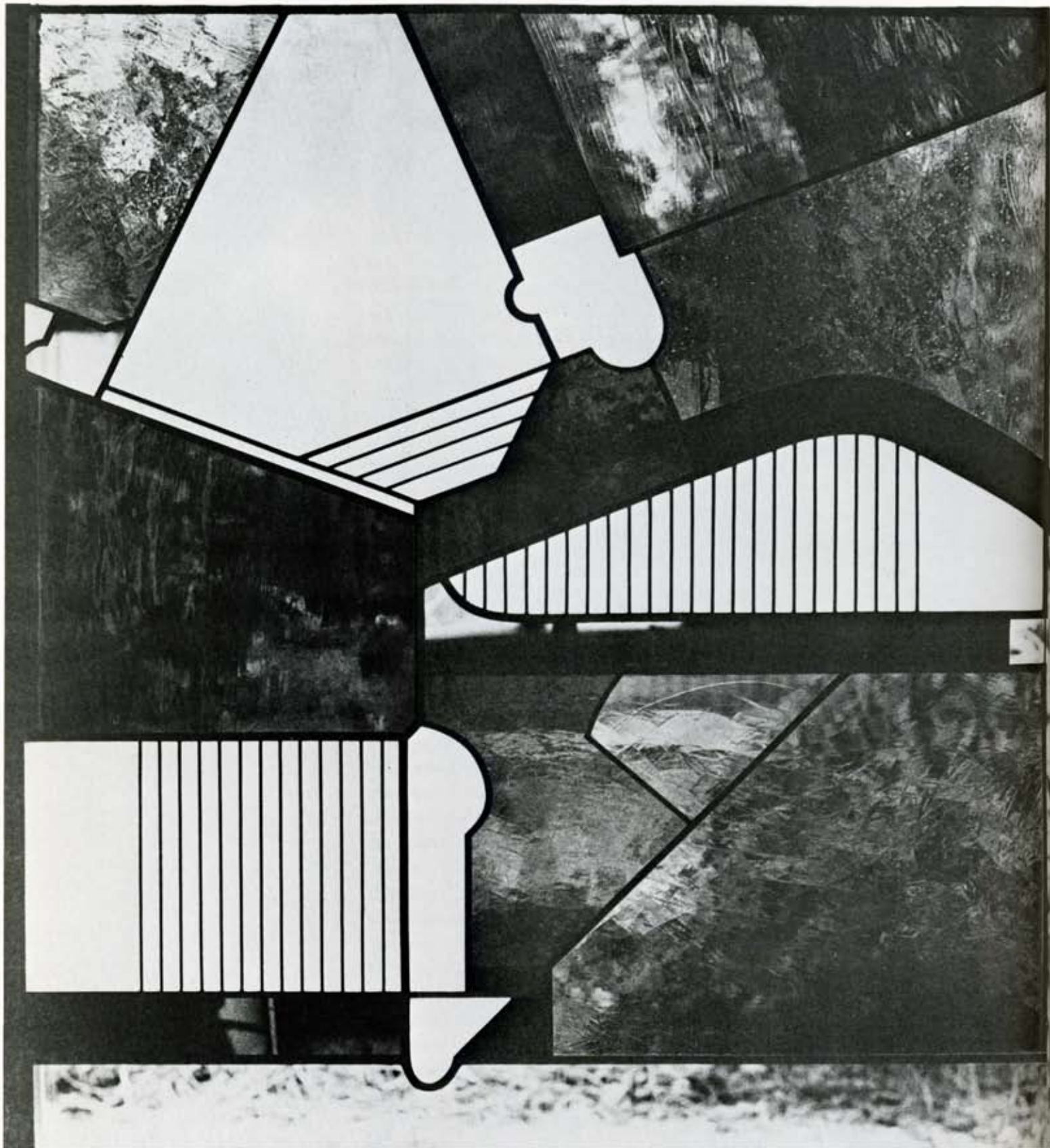
The Language of Stained Glass

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Pop Art, as many of them already have⁶ — the bland and the mock-serious, the obsessive and the lowbrow, the gadgety and the erotic — to run full tilt against the still popular conception of stained glass as a pious Victorian confection. But by doing so he places himself in an even more tenuous position: dependent for the shock value of his work upon the mere novelty of its *being* stained glass. Or finally, confronted with all of the more intractable elements of the medium itself, which become increasingly limiting and obtrusive the more stained glass is reduced in scale, he may resort to feats of technical legerdemain, not unlike those employed by the tour-de-force miniaturists of the 16th and 17th centuries (pages 89 and 90). But the more painstaking and time-consuming these become the more pressing must become the question, to others if not to himself: *Why stained glass at all?*

To all of this there is an obvious, attractive, and yet not wholly satisfactory answer. Confronted with an architecture whose leading practitioners were plainly uncomfortable not just with stained glass but with all of the allied arts — an architecture that proclaimed its own narrowly formalistic autonomy with an almost Puritanical zeal — these panel makers, joined in some cases by architectural artists of long standing, really had little choice but to attempt to go it alone. Hence the vitality, the fantasy and the ingenuity of the best of this work is not only real, it has been created against all odds. Undoubtedly, this is true. But we are still left with the problems I have enumerated; they too are very real; to the extent that they are inherent in the nature of the medium they will not go away. And we are left with the question with which we began: How to account for the almost charismatic attraction of visual autonomy — a phenomenon that according to our analysis can scarcely be said to exist?

Perhaps the answer lies so close at hand that we have overlooked it altogether. For it is a fact that photographs, in magazines, in books like this one, but above all in the form of color slides projected on a screen, tend to have an aggrandizing effect on works of art — most particularly small works, or details excerpted from larger ones. Plucked out of context and projected on the screen, a figure that one might never notice in Chartres suddenly acquires a dramatic monumentality, a visual impact that is out of all proportion to its effect in the actual window. Yet there can be little doubt that *we tend to read such purely photographic aggrandizement back into the thing itself*. Similarly, the photograph of a stained-glass panel taken under ideal light conditions and cropped so that nothing else shows *is* visually autonomous in a variety of ways that the work itself can never be; and this too undoubtedly gets read back into it. If that is the case, then the question we ought to be asking is, which is actually functioning as the governing norm, the stained glass itself or its photographic image? How, through the agency of the camera, do we affect our perception of this art in the very act of trying to study and document it?

This is the question that we must now consider.